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AUTHOR Bosher, Susan
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ABSTRACT

The Commanding English Program at the University of Minnesota is designed to meet the educational and social needs of academically underprepared students whose native language is not English. Most of the students in this population are Southeast Asian refugees with interrupted education who have finished high school in the United States. The program is a 3-quarter sequence of intensive coursework that concentrates on reading and writing for academic purposes. The writing component is comprised of three courses built on the process model of composition. The first course focuses on personal narrative writing to develop confidence and interest. Students are encouraged to explore cultural issues in theme assignments. The second course integrates reading and writing and provides a bridge from personal to academic writing. Students explore topics of cultural and educational significance in their writing exercises. The third course is content- and research-based, with the objective of initiating students into the academic discourse of the university. By the end of the sequence, students are expected to meet minimum freshman composition standards. A 24-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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Developing a Writing Curriculum for Academically Underprepared College ESL Students

Susan Bosher
Commanding English Program
Division of Arts, Communication, and Philosophy
General College
University of Minnesota
240 Appleby Hall
Mpls., MN 55455

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In recent years, there has been a great influx of immigrants and refugees to the United States. Many of these immigrants are not literate in their native language and have experienced limited or disrupted education. In many cases, their native language is completely unrelated to English and their native culture very different from Western, industrialized countries, factors which contribute to an already difficult situation of cultural adjustment and second language acquisition.

Many of these new immigrants are refugees from Southeast Asia. Their history and educational experiences in this country illustrate the complexities involved in working with the growing population of immigrants and refugees in institutions of higher education across the country, a population heretofore not widely recognized and discussed in traditional ESL journals.

Since 1975, almost a million Southeast Asians have resettled in the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1990). Many of the early refugees, who arrived in 1975-1976, were not unlike international students, with "relatively high levels of formal education, literacy, work experience and exposure to urban life and Western values" (Reder, 1982, p. 268). They were adequately served by traditional ESL programs oriented towards the educated, literate adult. Younger students typically had had formal English language training in their country of origin, usually Vietnam, and were mainstreamed into regular content courses in high schools with ESL tutoring provided (Stephany, 1985). Students from this first wave generally did very well in

school (Terdal, 1985).

The second wave of refugees, however, differed dramatically from the first. Socially, economically, and educationally, the "boat people" of Vietnam, and the Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong, who began arriving in 1978-1979, were less advantaged. "Relatively few [had] any previous education or work experience relevant to an industrialized economy or exposure to urban life or Western technology and values" (Reder, 1982, p. 268). Many of the children in this second wave had never learned to read and write in their native language, either because schools were closed after 1975, as in Cambodia and rural Vietnam, or because, in the case of the Hmong from Laos, the society was basically non-literate and formal education was generally not available. In addition, many of these students lived in refugee camps overseas for two to five years, where little or no formal education was provided (Terdal, 1985).

New kinds of ESL programs were designed to meet the pressing needs of these students. Programs were developed for adults that focused on basic literacy, survival skills, and vocational training. In the public school system, ESL programs were developed, but not necessarily staffed by trained ESL instructors. Students were enrolled in courses requiring a minimum of language skills such as art, physical education, and music. As oral English proficiency improved, students were mainstreamed into content area courses (Stephany, 1985). Although these students have usually developed good oral

communicative skills, they have been "unable to compete academically in secondary classes that require a higher level of proficiency in reading and writing than they have attained" (Terdal, 1985, p. 4).

Furthermore, LEP students enrolled in ESL classes are either not enrolled in content-area classes or are not proficient enough in English to be getting much out of them. As more and more is demanded of students in increasing grade levels in content courses, the farther and farther LEP students fall behind. "By the time they [have] acquired enough proficiency in English to receive meaningful instruction in content-area classes, they had in the meantime lost 2-3 years of... content knowledge in mathematics, science, and social studies at their age-grade level. This [puts] them significantly behind in mastery of the complex material required for high school students" (Collier, 1987, p. 633).

Recent research (Collier, 1987) conducted with LEP (limited English proficient) students at appropriate age/grade levels in their native language, indicates that it can take as much as eight years to reach the 50th percentile on national norms in reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, when schooled all in the second language. Since many LEP students today would not be placed at age-appropriate grade levels, it is reasonable to assume they would need more than eight years to reach the 50th percentile in their second language.

Thus, by the time these students reach the college level, several factors seem to characterize their educational background: 1) little or no formal education in their first language, 2) interrupted formal education from their first language to their second, and 3) delayed academic content acquisition in any language.

In addition, there are numerous other factors having to do with refugee students' life circumstances, which affect their ability to concentrate on learning. For example, because of the limited ability of older refugees to function within the new culture, students frequently manage their households and represent their family in situations that involve contact with the majority culture. In addition, students usually work to contribute financially to the support of their family. These additional responsibilities leave them with less time and energy for studying. "The relevance of such external variables to one's ability to learn, or more accurately, to attend to learning, is so self-evident it scarcely merits mentioning except for the fact that such influences have been given relatively little attention in second language acquisition research and teaching" (Kleinmann, 1982, p. 240).

While some of these issues also concern immigrant students, for refugees there is the additional emotional and psychological stress of having been forced to leave their country and adjust to life in a completely alien, and not always hospitable, culture. In this regard, refugees are unlike immigrants, who choose to

leave their native country and can in some ways prepare ahead of time for the changes they will encounter in their new life and culture. In general, however, the situation of minority language learners, both immigrants and refugees, is very different from that of international students, who ostensibly will return home, because typically the very existence of minority cultures is threatened by the overwhelming economic, social, and political power of the majority culture. When second language learners feel insecure about their identity, they may be less open to the new language and culture, and therefore, less likely to take risks in learning the second language. Self-confidence and the willingness to take risks are frequently cited in the literature as important personality traits in successful second language learners. "Students who have ambivalence about their cultural identity tend to do poorly whereas 'widespread school failure does not occur in minority groups that are positively oriented towards both their own and the dominant culture, [that] do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and [that] are not alienated from their own cultural values'" (Cummins, 1986, as cited in Dean, 1989, p. 27).

In second language acquisition theory, comprehensible input is considered essential for successful language acquisition to take place. This input is made available to learners in situations of natural communication which require interaction and negotiation between listener and speaker. If refugees are experiencing severe stress in their personal lives, they are less

likely to engage in communicative interactions, thereby limiting their access to comprehensible input necessary for language acquisition to take place. Refugees easily fall into patterns of avoidance and isolation from the majority culture, exacerbated by the social order of the immigrant community and the limited opportunities they have for interacting in the second language. Therefore, Kleinmann (1982) argues:

> ... customary teaching techniques of university ESL programs which cater to the learning ability of students in monitor model terms, are inappropriate for undereducated refugees... [who] simply do not have the necessary learning skills or experience to engage in formal language study. Instead, ESL programs are more likely to succeed if they concentrate on stimulating acquisition by involving refugees in activities within the classroom which will provide them frequent opportunities to practice English... emphasizing their informal language acquisition potential (p. 242).

For many of the refugee students who have graduated from American high schools and are entering college today, their strongest skill is their oral communicative competence. Cummins, however, distinguishes between basic communicative skills, context-embedded and cognitively undemanding aspects of language, and context-reduced, cognitively demanding language tasks of formal schooling (Cummins, 1982). Contrary to popular opinion, fluency in interpersonal communicative language does not necessary imply proficiency in academic language, and requires much less time to master. However, students who speak English fairly well, especially those who have graduated from American high schools, tend to assess unrealistically their academic

language proficiency, and are therefore, not generally receptive to the need for more ESL. These students may have avoided classes with heavy language demands at the secondary level and may plan to do the same in college. Left to their own choices, many refugee students enroll in courses that are primarily math-based (Woods, 1987). Courses unrelated to their major, particularly language classes, are considered unnecessary, perhaps even as obstructing rather than facilitating their educational goals. Students may also resent being put in classes with other second language students if they were already mainstreamed in high school.

If educators hope to engage students in the learning process, issues such as these must be taken into consideration when designing an English for Academic Purposes curriculum. "Literacy [and by extension higher education] must be functional, relevant, and meaningful for individuals and the society in which they live. It must be able to meet the needs of individuals for their own social purposes and goals" (Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith, 1984, p. 22).

Success within the classroom, however, may very well be determined by the ability to process information in the way required in classroom contexts. Naturally, students who have had little or no formal education in their native language and who have experienced delayed or limited academic content acquisition have not had sufficient exposure to or opportunities to practice the discourse patterns of the content-area classroom. Although

literacy and literacy activities have purposes and meanings in a variety of contexts, within the academic setting, one style--the essayist style--is most often valued (Weinstein, 1984). Although there may be room to redefine what is meant or currently valued by "the essayist style" and the means to achieve this end can differ radically, students must be able to write clearly, with a purpose, and about something meaningful to a particular content area. For most academic disciplines, this means students must be able to state their main ideas explicitly and develop those ideas with support relevant to specific content areas. This requires that students be able to take meaning from text, as well, determine an author's message and purpose in writing, synthesize the main ideas, and eventually relate them to their own. "When we teach composition, we are teaching culture. Depending on students' backgrounds, we are teaching at least academic culture, what is acceptable evidence, what persuasive strategies work best, what is taken to be a demonstration of 'truth' in different disciplines" (Dean, 1989, p. 24).

A major concern in designing an appropriate curriculum for academically underprepared ESL students at the college level should be how to bridge the students' high school experiences, in which they achieved oral communicative competence, with the language and academic requirements for success at the University. The very nature of a bridge program, however, implies a process that takes time to complete. The program must begin at the level of the students and bring them within a realistic amount of time

to where they need to be. To proceed too quickly would defeat the purpose of the program; too slowly, however, and students will get bored and restless.

The Commanding English Program in General College at the University of Minnesota has been designed specifically to meet the educational and social needs of academically underprepared ESL students, the majority of whom are Southeast Asian refugees with interrupted educational backgrounds who have graduated from American high schools. General College is the open admissions college at the University of Minnesota, requiring only a high school diploma or G.E.D. for admissions. Non-native speakers of English must also take the MELAB (Michigan English Language Assessment Battery) and score at least a 65. The College no longer offers degrees of its own, but rather serves as a port of entry to the University. Its mission is "to enroll, and prepare for admission to University degree programs, students who require special preparation because of previous circumstances or previous education" (General College University of Minnesota Bulletin, 1989-91, p. 6).

The Commanding English Program is a three quarter sequence of intensive coursework for ESL students. Although our program serves primarily students who have graduated from American high schools, enrolled in our program are also refugee students who have graduated from high school in their native country, immigrant students, and a few international students, as well. The curriculum has been designed as an academic bridge program,

focusing on reading and writing for academic purposes. Students are required to take three writing courses, three reading courses, two of which are adjunct reading courses, paired with courses in sociology, biology, and general arts, an oral communications course, as well as an optional higher education "survival seminar," which introduces students to resources on campus. The focus of the rest of this paper will be the writing component.

The writing curriculum consists of three courses, all built around the process model of composition, each with specific goals and assignments, but with a considerable degree of sequencing between courses built in. The first course focuses on personal, narrative writing as a means of developing confidence in the students as writers and fluency and ease in their writing. Students are asked to analyze and write about the significance of their personal experiences, as well as write opinion pieces to the University newspaper about issues of concern to them, as first steps in the bridge to expository writing. Students write extensively in journals, develop sentence structure through focused sentence-combining, and begin to focus on the most frequently made errors in their writing. An editing system is introduced in this course which students continue to work with in all subsequent writing courses in the program. Formal instruction in grammar is limited to specific troublespots in the students' writing and is approached through analyzing errors in students' writing selected on the basis of their frequency,

consistency, and teachability (Bosher, 1989).

The second course integrates reading and writing and provides a bridge between personal, narrative writing and the academic, research-based writing of the last course in the sequence. Students explore topics of cultural and educational significance in their writing, such as immigration and assimilation in America, the American educational system, and cultural values and change. Research for tnese papers is through interviews of both members of their ethnic community and contacts at the University. Students are encouraged to see members of their family and community as important resources for their education. Cultural topics, as well as incorporation of the students' cultural background into the process of writing a paper, are important in this regard. "It is precisely this valuing of culture within the school that lead to academic success because it reverses the role of domination of students by the school" (Dean, 1989, p. 27).

Collaborative learning is strongly encouraged through regular group interaction and discussion of issues central to the progression of the course, and in the last writing course through magazine projects. The negotiation of meaning in the classroom is critical to creating an environment in which a transformation in the way students think and compose meaning (both from and with text) can take place. "Mastery of written communication requires a difficult but critical shift in the consciousness of the learner, a shift of attention from an immediate audience that

shares the learner's experiences and frame of reference to a larger, abstract, and unfamiliar audience" (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977, p. 358). This shift takes place when there is meaningful interaction with others. "Effective education requires the recognition and the utilization of the potential in all human beings to participate actively in their own learning. Therefore educational success depends upon a change in the social environment - a break with past alienation and marginality" (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977, p. 362). For this to happen in the classroom, there must be "authentic dialogue between learners and educators as equally knowing subjects. Language is developed, extended, and modified through the constant interaction of individuals and their social context. The critical role of dialogue... can be put into effect by the conscious and productive reliance upon groups in which learners confront and work through-orally and in writing-issues of significance to their lives" (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977, p. 368). The classroom becomes the center of everything, "the place where teachers continuously discover, test, and modify ways of stimulating students' intellectual resources, and where students learn to understand and to assess the roles they have and can come to take in their own education" (Bartholomae and Petrosky, 1986, p. 8).

As the student moves through the sequence of writing courses, there is increasing emphasis placed on the integration of reading and writing, and eventually on reading and writing in

specific areas of inquiry.

The last course in the writing sequence is content-based, and focuses on initiating students into the academic discourse of the university. "Our language is the language of written academic discourse... We want students to learn to compose a response to their reading within the conventions of the highly conventional language of the university classroom" (Bartholomae and Petrosky, 1986, pp. 4-5).

The students begin, however, with personal, narrative writing and the analysis of key experiences, people, and places in their lives. There are many reasons for having these students do so. First of all, it allows them to concentrate on the process of writing itself and not be concerned about mastering specific content material. Although students can speak fairly fluently, they do not use this fluency in their writing. With extensive journal writing, in-class freewriting, and drafting of themes, students are encouraged to trust in their sense of the language, as they develop greater fluency and ease. Once students have acquired fluency and ease in their writing, other issues such as accuracy and style can be addressed.

Secondly, students who have not been successful academically or who have not had much experience writing are not likely to feel confident about their abilities as writers, nor are they likely to feel any sense of "ownership" over their writing. The authority has always been the teacher, and the students have learned to say what they think the teacher wants to hear. When

the subject matter is the student's own personal experiences, however, the student automatically becomes the authority. The teacher becomes a facilitator in the learning process, helping students work through various issues in their writing, but giving students as much freedom to express themselves as possible.

In addition, through personal writing students begin to think and write like a reader. Because students are the only ones who really know what happened in a particular situation or what that experience meant, they must begin to anticipate the needs of their readers to communicate clearly and effectively, thus developing the very important sense of writing for an audience.

Finally, with personal writing, students have the opportunity to explore the significance of certain events, people, and places that have influenced who they are today. Writing becomes a tool for self-exploration, for learning about the significance of their experiences. This can be a very empowering experience for students who may feel silenced by their lack of language proficiency or by their alien status in a foreign culture. By the end of this course, student usually feel much more comfortable with writing and their ability to use writing in ways that are personally meaningful to them. Furthermore, good feelings about writing help reduce students' fear of writing. When students are no longer afraid of using language to communicate, they can take risks with their writing and try new, different, and more challenging tasks. It is only

by taking risks that student ultimately improve their ability to communicate effectively.

The second course in our sequence integrates reading and writing, and serves as a bridge course from personal, narrative writing to academic, research-based writing and is based on an interactionist approach to curriculum. An interactionist curriculum is one which begins with the "here and now" of the students, and is broadened as the perspective of the student changes and becomes more social, less subjective (Elsasser and John-Steiner, 1977). As students break down personal walls in the classroom and find common ground with other students, they may begin to see connections between their own lives and the larger society, and to use writing as a means of effecting change in their environment. They may also become more interested in the ideas of others and more capable of taking meaning from text, and relating information from text to their own issues, concerns, and ideas.

The readings, writings, and discussions in this course explore issues and questions of relevance in the students' lives. In the unit on education and work in society, for example, students are asked to consider how they define the terms "education" and "work," and what the value of education and work is for them and for the new society in which they live. The readings for this topic include an article entitled "A Generation at Risk" from The Washington Post National Weekly Edition, October 26, 1987) and a chapter from the book College as a

Training Ground for Jobs entitled "The Meaning of a Good Job." The newspaper is a story about an elementary school in St. Paul located near a Hmong housing project, and discusses the rise of the minority student population in the school system and the social and educational implications of this change in demographics.

The second reading responds to the question of whether the role of postsecondary education should be to provide a means to a good job or a way to a good life, and what, after all, is meant by a good job? The article challenges most of our assumptions about a good job and basically concludes that there is no such thing as a good job that is good for everyone.

In addition to class discussion, students respond to readings in a journal. They take notes as they read or write a summary of the main ideas when they are through, followed by a personal response to what they have read.

The readings also serve as a springboard for the writing assignments. For the unit on education and work, for example, students are asked to chose a quote from one of the readings that they feel expresses an important idea they would like to find out more about. Students then develop a questionnaire that will help them investigate the idea or issue associated with the quote. The instructor works closely with the students to make sure they have chosen a meaningful quote that can be further investigated, and that their questions are appropriate for the idea they wish to explore. Students then find three people to interview. The

information they gather from the interview provides them with the material they need to write their paper.

This assignment takes students into their communities and engages them in meaningful dialogue with members of their community about a topic of personal and practical interest. They must then take this personally acquired knowledge and communicate what they have learned in these interviews to someone who was not there, as well as synthesize and integrate relevant portions of this information with their own ideas in their writing. Students move from the personal dimension of their own lives to the experiences of others - of their classmates, members of their community, and anonymous writers.

By the end of the quarter, students are able to understand and react to various types of printed information, integrate ideas generated from the readings and class discussion into their writing, and organize and develop themes in an expository style - with a clear introduction, main points, supporting details and examples, and a conclusion. The students are now ready to move on to the final stage of the writing component, the research-based expository writing class.

The final writing course in our program focuses on academic, research-based writing in a specific content area, such as environmental issues or the role of media in contemporary society. Shih (1986) argues that content-based writing instruction develops the kind of thinking, researching, and writing skills needed for academic writing tasks. "Students

develop strategies for collecting, synthesizing, and interpreting new information from external sources as well as for connecting such new information to previous knowledge and beliefs. As in real academic writing, writing serves to help students consolidate and extend their understanding of the topics under study" (p. 628). In addition, students are more motivated in ESL courses where the connection between composition instruction and academic studies is made clear (Shih, 1986).

The writing assignments in this course closely parallel the kinds of writing tasks students will encounter in academic content courses, including summaries, an analysis of a topic, a position paper, and a research paper. In a survey of academic writing assignments at the university, Horowitz (1986) found that "generally speaking, the academic writer's task is not to create personal meaning, but to find, organize, and present data according to fairly explicit instructions" (p. 455). Horowitz also points out that the language expected of students in these writing assignments is that of academic English, and that it is necessary to teach students strategies of organization and presentation.

By the end of our sequence of writing courses, students are expected to meet the minimum standards of freshman composition at the University. The process by which students reach this point, however, bridges the gap between the inner, subjective voice and the outer, public voice of the academy. Students first learn to value their own voice and their ability to make meaning in

writing through personal, narrative writing, but they are also initiated into the discourse conventions of the University which they will need in order to meet their academic and career goals. The curriculum focuses on larger issues of making meaning and communicating to an audience, but attention is also given to clarity and accuracy in writing.

Finally, students are encouraged to explore cultural issues in many of the theme assignments. This is especially important for refugee students who are faced with establishing a new identity which is acceptable to their family members and to the host country (Lee, 1988), that also provides them with strong self-esteem. While our primary responsibility to the students may be to help with their academic transition from high school to college, the cultural transition they are making as well, is a crucial, maybe even the critical, component in students' successful adaptation to the demands of the university.

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